# REMEMBERING THE MISSISSIPPI STAR MAGAZINE, MAURICE SINGLETON, JR.

Hancock County Library System

April 24, 2025

## PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Maurice Singleton, Jr. conducted by Ash Parker on April 24, 2025. This interview is part of the Hancock County Library System Digital Archives. The interview was conducted to mark the digitization of the *Mississippi Star* collection in Hancock County Library System's Mississippi Special Collection funded by the National Endowment of the Humanities / Internet Archive earlier in the year, as part of the Hancock Community Archive initiative.

Transcription: Otter.ai speech to text reviewed by Ash Parker

Narrator: Maurice Ernest Singleton, Jr.

Interviewer: Ash Parker, Collections & Digital Services Librarian, Hancock County Library System

Location: Bay St. Louis Library, Bay St. Louis, Mississippi

Date: Thursday, April 24, 2025

## TRANSCRIPT

Parker 0:02

This is an oral history interview with Maurice Singleton, Jr, conducted by Ash Parker on April 24 2025 at 2pm at the Bay St Louis Library in Bay. St Louis, Mississippi. This interview is being recorded for the Hancock County Library System's Digital Archives. The focus of today's interview is Mr. Maurice Singleton's editorial work with the Mississippi Star magazine published from 1996 to 2000. So a little background influence, background and your early influences. Can you share some memories of your upbringing at Bay- in Bay, Saint Louis, and how they influenced your interest in journalism?

Singleton 0:41

Yeah, I think I tell everybody I grew up in Mayberry. Bay, St Louis was just a great place to grow up. I crawfished in ditches, I hunted Robin. I spent a lot of times with my great uncle, who was just the most delightful person in the world. You never do anything wrong with him, and he taught me how to cut grass and to, I guess, want to be my own person, and to make money, taught me how to mow the yards. And I, over the years, I mowed a number of yards, and that increased as I got older. So I always had little side jobs to turn my own money.

So I grew up pretty independent. And as I got toward I guess Middle School, the civil rights movement was progressing. And I guess with my little bit of independence, with my uncle and his older sister, my grandmother, I just, my grandmother was the kind of person who believed in standing up and you stood for stood up if you saw something was wrong. And I learned that from her when I was, I guess I was probably eight or nine years old. She took us crabbing one day and then took us to the beach. And didn't realize at the time, the beach wasn't for me. It was Carroll Avenue, a street that she lived on. So it was Beach Boulevard and highway 90, and when my cousins and I and my couple of my siblings got out of the car and went into the water, everybody that was in the water got out of the water. And people started screaming at us. And then before too long, a reporter came from the local newspaper, and then he told us to turn around. And she told us, don't turn around to take a picture. And she said some choice words about if you want to take a picture, he wouldn't get a picture of our face. I said that pretty politely. Okay. And we walked from Carroll Avenue all the way to Saint Stanislaus pier, where my grandfather worked, where my dad and two uncles and my grandfather were waiting for us, and I never get my… one of my uncles said, telling my grandmother that they were all going to lose their jobs. And my

grandmother told him, nobody was going to lose a job. She said, who's going to work these two penny jobs you have anyway? And my dad told my told my uncle, who said that, that she did what she had to do that day. She was standing up. And then years later, I learned from my dad that my grandmother did that because there were a couple of other beach protests along the.. one in Biloxi and one in Gulfport, that I had never made a connection. I knew of those other beach protests, but I didn't realize my grandmother was following the leadership of two prominent doctors, Dr. Gilbert Mason in Biloxi and Dr. Dunn in Gulfport. They had the beach wade ins, and so my grandmother was called herself standing up for the people of Bay St Louis to give them the right to swim on local beaches. So..

So I think that was pretty pivotal in my development as standing up. And then there was something going on. I played basketball in high school and *Sports Illustrated*, did a three-part series on the black athlete, and that was very eye opening for me, because they were being recognized for their, I guess, going to college and playing basketball on a college level, and the black athlete was changing the dynamics of racial participation in the country. So I think that played a big part too. And I became a big reader of *Sports Illustrated*, *Jet*, *Ebony Magazine*, any magazine I get my hands on to learn about the changing United States at the time.

And so, I, when I got out of high school, I knew it was a good student, and English was a favorite subject of mine. And so I think that my just, my confidence in the in my English class, and by the way, my first test at Bay High Patricia Griffith gave me my English test back last and she made a big deal out of me scoring a 98 on the test. And another one of my classmates, a white male, had a 95 and he was very interested in seeing my paper. And so that's, that always stuck with me. That was the fall of 1968 my freshman year, my sophomore year at Bay High my first year in an integrated classroom setting. And so I think I a little bit momentum from that too.

Parker 5:16

Okay, you talked a little bit, but were there any particular events or individuals in your early life that inspired you to pursue a career in publishing.

Singleton 5:25

Well, I think the, I read *Jet* and *Ebony* magazine with m… with I was just so interested in learning about African American people, so I regularly, I read *Jet* magazine every week. I read *Ebony* magazine every month. And then when *Black Enterprise* magazines began publishing, when I first got my hand on that magazine, I immediately became a subscriber. And I got that received, *Black Enterprise* magazine at my home, and I read it from cover to cover, because we didn't see very many African American owned businesses in Mississippi at the time. Not in Bay St Louis, anyway. I think there were, there were a couple. There were undertakers. And there was a pulp wood company that was owned by Mr. Douglas Williams, who eventually became the chief of police in Bay St Louis. So I just think just seeing that the times were changing and opportunities for African American owned businesses was increasing, I think that, I got some inspiration there as well, and I think that's why I eventually worked toward that goal of starting my own publication.

Parker 6:36

Okay, so what motivated then you, what motivated you to start the Mississippi star in 1996?

Singleton 6:43

Well, I think my career had got distracted because I had to provide for a family, and I, when I worked my way through the company, I got two promot… Well, I actually got three promotions. I became a division trainer, I became a resource manager, and then I became a district manager with the company in Los Angeles. And although I enjoyed the my growth and development in that company, it was so far removed for what my real goals were. So I said, I want to get home and I want to start my publication, first chance I get. So I worked in advertising sales at the local television station, WLOX in Biloxi, and I saw that I could sell advertising and I could put together the content part of that mix that with the ability to sell advertising. That I could make it work. And so it came together in the summer of 1996. I used, you know, well, I used, I called on some of the same companies that I sold advertising for, at WLOX, and some additional ones. And I was able to, to make it work.

Parker 8:01

When you first started, what was your mission and vision for this publication when you first started?

Singleton 8:07

Well, my mission was to get as much local information, the positive things. It just seemed like oftentimes, when African Americans were presented in media, it was like negative stereotypes of

people doing things that weren't good. And I just, the people that I grew up with, the people that I knew, the people I associated with, were all doing positive things, but sometimes we're painted with the same negative brush and of that of what the media focuses on. And so I had an experience with, I moved, I built a house, and I moved into this neighborhood, and in 95 and two weeks after I moved into this mixed neighborhood, someone, two boys were driving to my house on bicycles, on my sister and her husband's bicycles, and somebody accused those two boys of stealing up their bikes, and which I knew wasn't true, but I didn't get the support of the local police. They figured, well, they just made a mistake, that they made a mistake, and accused, but accused your kid, or those kids of stealing bikes, stealing their bike, and they made a mistake. And I didn't see it that way, because they threatened to blow the kids heads off. The guy drove rode his truck to the right side of my house, to the left side of my house. His wife walked across the property on the right side of my house, and they cornered the kids, my three kids, as well as the two boys who rode to my house and threatened to blow the kid's head off because his bike was stolen. Well, it was mistake, but it was a misrepresentation, but the police saw it as just a mistake they made, and it wasn't that big a deal. I saw it as a big deal because it was the second time that my kids had seen someone threaten to blow their heads off. The same vocabulary. We were living in Texas the first time. But I just thought that people needed to see that the misrepresentations are going to hurt somebody someday, and somebody is going to be a victim. So I saw the need at that point, and it was just, it just so happened that all those things kind of coincided at the within a year's time. And so it was time to start Mississippi Star.

Parker 10:27

Was there any other- you mentioned some media? Was there any other media that you consumed that did have good representation or that inspired you a little bit?

Singleton 10:37

Well, besides *Jet* magazine, *Ebony* magazine, *Black Enterprise* magazine, and just *Essence* magazine too, because it was th- It was focused on women's issues, but it was a very positive and strong spin on all the positive potential of what was happening in our country at the time. African Americans were finding their way in different businesses. They were finding their way in different media, and they were having more success in print media. They were having more success in broadcast media. And just, it just was a tide of positive change with media and African American community. So yeah, there were, there were a number of publications, there were a number of television programs. Brian Gumbel was succeeding on *Today Show*. African Americans- Robin Roberts was her career was taken off too, and I got to interview her for public eventually, I was able to interview her for a publication that I was doing with Pass Christian public schools. It was *The Educator*, and she was a former student, so I got to talk with her a little bit. And so the times were changing with perceptions of African Americans and African Americans were better represented in media across the across the country.

Parker 11:57

Talk about the types of stories and topics that the *Mississippi Star* focused on during its run.

Singleton 12:02

Yeah, there were local stories. And when I say local, I mean Bay, St Louis. There were stories in Gulfport, there were stories in Hattiesburg. I got to cover Dr. Gilbert Mason, who was a big part of the Biloxi wade-ins. He kind of organized some of those. And so I got to interview him and do a story on his career and what he did for the movement down here on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. And also did a story on Vernon Dahmer senior, or yeah Vernon Damon senior, who kind of spearheaded a Voting Rights Act, the voting rights movement in Forest County and surrounding areas in the Hattiesburg area. And he was eventually assassinated for his work. So I got to interview his family, and for many, many years, that story went untold because, I guess they weren't able to get enough people to testify or to say what happened. But as the years passed, and as those sons of Vernon Dahmer began demanding for a full investigation, things changed. And I think in 1998 there was an effort to bring back those people to trial. Because they were acquitted back in the day. And I think one of them did, one or two of them did some very short jail time. But the person, the Ku Klux Klansman, who was a leader of that effort to firebomb his house, people still wanted him convicted. And in 1998 he was brought back to trial, and he eventually was convicted. And so I was able to interview the family as they were going through that. And what really stood out was, I went to the to interview the son and the wife, the widow of Vernon Dahmer. When I get to their house on a Friday afternoon, they were so glad to see me, but they were in the process of an interview with, I forget the program, *Nightline*, ABC Television was at their house interviewing them when I got there. And they were just- Just wait. Just wait. We want to talk with you. And so here I am with *Mississippi Star* magazine, this little regional publication that did extend far beyond Forest County. I mean, I covered the coast through southern counties in Mississippi, and they were eager to talk with me. And so kind of made me a little

uncomfortable at the moment. But when we got through, they invited me in. We sat at the dining room table, and we began talking about Vernon Damon senior. And as we began the conversation, I asked a question, and the question had to do with their feelings about what- you know, the day, as they began talking about that night when their home was fire bombed, and I saw the boys were all away. He had four sons, and they were all in military. But they all came, eventually came back for the funeral, and everything. But as they begin to tell me this story, Vernon Dahmer junior was a fair, complected man, and he turned red. And his, he began crying, and his, the widow of Vernon Damon senior, she started crying as they began telling me the events of that night. As they began recalling the events, those events were so close to them. This firebomb had happened in 19- February- January or February- January, 10 of 1966. And this was 1998 when I was talking to them, what 32 years later. And those days when they talked, it was like it happened yesterday. So it was very close to them. So I realized the importance of what I was doing and that story. And then, after the story first published, the person who turned State's evidence, or the person who was the- what was it- he was given information. He was the person, I forgot what you would call that person, but they were like an undercover person. They knew and were very close to the head Klansman. And he gave evidence on this person, on the head Klansman, and he told the story. He called me one day, I'm sitting in my office, and I answered the phone, and he told who he was, and man, I was, couldn't believe it. He said, I just read your article, and your article was right on point. He said, I thank you for telling this story, because the story needed to be told. So he felt like I helped him by putting the story out there. So very incredible moment, I never forget being in my office, upstairs at my house when I got the call from the person who testified against Vernon Dahmer. I mean, I'm sorry against the Ku Klux

Klansman who was convicted of assigning those Ku Klux Klan members to firebombing the home of Vernon Dahmer.

Parker 17:30

So I'm going to follow up a little on *Mississippi Star*. Tell me about who else was a part of that organization. How, how many people did you employ? And what was your newsroom like?

Singleton 17:43

Well, the newsroom [laughs], it was a very small public, very small-scale operation. I had some people who would do contribute articles, and I was the only full-time staff member. I had a layout artist who subcontracted with me. I submitted all the material that I got to her. She would lay the magazine out. I was the only full, full-time staff. She was the layout artist, and people would contribute materials to me. So it never grew to the point I think the most paid subscribers I had at any given time was maybe 770 subscribers. That sounds like a small number, but it was a, it's a good-sized number. And then all the libraries had copies. The Harrison County Libraries, the University of Southern Mississippi, libraries across southern Mississippi subscribed to it, so we had a number of readers, and everybody said that people were eager to read, you know, read *Mississippi Star* magazine, so a lot of people read it in libraries. But I think 770 subscribers was the most I ever had any given time.

Parker 18:54

Was that mostly local or across the state?

Singleton 18:56

It was primarily across the southern three southern counties. Then I had subscribers in Hattiesburg. Number of subscribers in Hattiesburg I went to the University of Southern Mississippi, so people that I had cont- made contact with when I was in college. Then I had people from across the country, little pockets, subscribers in Los Angeles, subscribers in Illinois, Louisiana. My mother's from Louisiana, so family who knew of the magazine there, but surprisingly, I probably had about a dozen subscribers in Los Angeles, half a dozen subscribers in Georgia, and subscribers across the country. Little, one, two subscribers in different states, that type thing. So yeah, but yeah.

Parker 19:48

How was the magazine received by the local community?

Singleton 19:50

It was received well, everybody, so they would call it the local people called it the *Mississippi Jet*, which was, *Jet* magazine was a journal-size publication, and *Mississippi Star* was a journal-size publication. It wasn't a full size eight and a half or nine by 12 or eight and a half by 11 magazine. So it was like, it was this size journal size publication. And so people call it the *Mississippi Jet*, and they loved to talk about it, and but it was very well received across the coast.

And I got a little bit of air time on television, sometimes, to talk about and also on radio. I went on local radio talking about it. So people knew about it, and people look forward to getting it. And people would always say, they call it the- some people call it the- that book, the little book, you know. But it was a journal-sized publication for the most part, it was received very well, and people enjoyed it.

Parker 20:50

Can you discuss any feedback or interactions you had with readers that stood out to you?

Singleton 20:56

Yeah, people that that particular article I did on Vernon, Vernon Dahmer, the assassination of Vernon Dahmer, and the interviewing the family, I think that was probably the most, I'm going to say, the most well-received our issue of the magazine, because a lot of people didn't know about it. It happened in January 1966 and I think a lot of people, even if they heard about it, a lot of people forgot it. And I went to school with three of Mr. Dahm-, two of Mr. Dahmer's children, and one of his granddaughters. And my first semester at USM in the fall of 1972 I met his granddaughter, and she didn't talk about it very much. But everybody on campus knew it, because they would always talk, there was a park named Vernon Dahmer Park, and so people knew about him, and people talked about it every now and then, but not very much, because he had passed, and not much had been done with other than the naming of the park. But when that, when the story that he the case against the, those responsible for his assassination, was brought back up, people started talking about it again. And people- people learned about it through

reading *Mississippi Star*, and they got a full, full story about, I think, I don't know, I seem like my story or coverage of it was about eight pages in *Mississippi Star.* So people read it. And then I remember being ay, I can't remember it was Burger King or McDonald's, and I saw this lady who, this white lady, who stopped me, and she said, I read your story about she said, I can't believe people would be so evil. And this lady, and I remember her name, I won't bring her name up, but she read that article in the library or in her I don't know if she had a copy, she subscribed or not. But she stopped me, and we talked. We talked for, I guess, about 15 minutes about it, about that particular issue, and out of the blue, she approached me, and she knew I wrote it, she knew who I was, and we just, she just enjoyed the moment, and I enjoyed the moment. I said she might have not been an enjoyable moment for her, but she wanted to let me know that she read that article, and it meant something to her that- that she couldn't believe people could be so evil, and that she was so glad that I had covered that story.

Parker 23:33

What were some of the significant challenges you faced running the magazine?

Singleton 23:40

Well, [laughs]… significant challenges. How I'm going to get all this content, enough content, meaningful content, and how was I going to pay for this issue and pay myself somewhat of a salary? So it was a small-time project, but I was able to do it for four and a half years, and you know, but it was a challenge every month to get it done. Then my parents helped me put labels on magazines every month, and they look forward to doing that, and I was glad, because it meant

something to them, and they were proud of me for doing that so and I was proud to take that publication to them, or to have them come over every month to stick labels onto me, then we bind them for a certain area and put them, take them to the post office by zip code, you know? So although it was every month was a challenge, every month was rewarding, because I was able to get it done and to get it out to my readers. Yeah.

Parker 24:43

Were there any particular achievements or moments that you consider highlights to your editorial tenure?

Singleton 24:50

Well, as an editor of *Mississippi Star*, I think there were highlights. It was- it was just such a great feeling every month to get it done, to get it finished. And to have some significant stories in there. If the story was significant, it was maybe somebody else contributed that hadn't contributed before, and who was excited to get their story in. So it was rewarding on a monthly basis, because I was able to recognize somebody in the community who may have not been recognized before that might have seemed small scale to somebody, but it was big scale to somebody else, because this person's story is out there because of something that they accomplished. And that might have not, on a scale of big scale of the of Mississippi, may not been that important to everybody else, but it was important to the readers of *Mississippi Star* because these people were positive, they were strong, maybe, and they stood up for something,

and that they recognized something in the community that hadn't been recognized before. So every month was, was important because somebody else's story was being told.

Parker 26:08

Looking back, how do you feel that the *Mississippi Star* contributed to the community and the and local journalism?

Singleton 26:15

Well, I think it, it contributed in a good way, because, again, local stories that weren't being told were being told. And people were glad to tell their stories. People were excited to tell their stories. And so I think on local journalism, there were, there was a void. There's always been a void on stories that… of African American importance that may have not been important to the large community--they were being told. And local people were glad to tell- and people would tell you, stop me all the time to tell me, man, I was so good- I was so glad to see that Mississippi, the *Mississippi Star* book, or the Mississippi- the little *Mississippi Jet*. They were always, people were always stopping me to tell me that they read a story. So I think *Mississippi Star* had an impact, and I think it made- it made more people aware that you have to read, you have to keep up. And more people were reading. And some people would tell me that I didn't used to read newspapers and magazines, but I read *Mississippi Star.* So people will let you know that it was important to them, yeah.

Parker 27:29

What lessons did you take away from your experience with the magazine that have influenced subsequent work?

Singleton 27:37

Well, the lessons is that everybody's story- everybody has a story. And although they don't get to express their stories, oftentimes, I was able to give opportunity to a lot of stories that might have never been told before. And so people, I gave people, or *Mississippi Star* gave people the opportunity to share their story. Yeah.

Parker 28:05

Well, let's wrap it up. Is there anything else that you'd like to share that we haven't talked about, or that you think is important to share about your impac-, your time with Mississippi star, or your perspectives on local journalism?

Singleton 28:20

Well, yeah, I think other publications, since I missed it when *Mississippi Star* went away, I was able to contribute to the *Sea Coast Echo*. I was able to contribute to the Pass Christian newspaper, to the Sun Herald. And so I was able to, I think I grew as a journalist, and I grew at telling- being able to tell stories in a journalistic way. I grew during that time, and since then, I've done stories for a number of other publications, which the story- I did a story on my

grandmother, and I think I might have mentioned that to you before. And a lot of people read this story about my grandmother in the *Sea Coast Echo*. And so I was able to appeal to a broader audience with that story. And a number of people read it. A number of people have told me about it, and a number of people continue to read it because it's online. And she was quite a, she was quite a fighter, and I was able to share her story. And I think that that story, and a number of other stories I'd still tell. I did a couple stories very recently for the *Shoofly* online magazine, and I, so I continue to tell stories. People's stories where those kind of stories, or story about local, African American, regional African American people who stand out. I was able to tell their story, and I continue to tell their stories.

Parker 29:51

One more thing, just so that it's in here, we recently digitized the *Mississippi Star*, and you were excited about allowing us to put that in our collection for future researchers. Tell me your what you were thinking about when, when we came to you to digitize and make this more accessible than just the library.

Singleton 30:14

Well, I think that it’s great because the stories that I published and that I have told over the course of those four years, they are available to people forever. [chuckles] You know? So I think that’s a great thing. To tell the story- So Vernon Dahmer’s story that wasn’t told in it’s entirety back in 1966 but was told in 1998, it’s available to people forever. As long as people are going to be looking at the Civil Rights Era in Mississippi, they will hear the story of Vernon Dahmer and

they'll know about Vernon Dahmer Sr. and the sacrifice that he paid just because he wanted to help people to feel comfortable going to vote and to- that he sacrificed his life. They're going know- they're going to be able to learn about him. They're going to be able to learn about other Civil Rights leaders like Dr. Gilbert Mason, Dr. Dunn in Gulfport. And so those stories will be available for people forever, however they're able to learn on digitalized media that what happened in the 1900s and the second half of the twentieth century, they're going to be able to learn because a lot of those stories are in *Mississippi Star*.

Parker 31:41

Great. Any final thoughts?

Singleton 31:42

I just want to, just excited that the library saw the value in *Mississippi Star*. And that, what you're doing with *Mississippi Star*. That those stories are going to be available for people. And so, yes, I'm very excited about that.

Parker 31:56

Okay. Well, thank you for sharing your stories with us today. I'll go ahead and sign off.

Transcribed by https://otter.ai and Ash Parker